

Sunday 15 September 2019

RATTLE: ROOTS & ORIGINS
MESSIAEN

Messiaen Éclairs sur l'Au-delà ...

Sir Simon Rattle conductor

Supported by the Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne

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Concert ends approx 8.25pm

Recorded by BBC Radio 3 for broadcast on 19 September



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University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

MESSIAEN

Olivier Messiaen in Profile 1908–92 / profile by Mark Parker



Above: Messiaen in 1982. Photo by Laurent MAOUS/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images

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'My faith is the grand drama of my life. I'm a believer, so I sing words of God to those who have no faith. I give bird songs to those who dwell in cities and have never heard them, make rhythms for those who know only military marches or jazz, and paint colours for those who see none.'
—

Olivier Messiaen was born in Avignon but spent almost his entire life in Paris. He entered the Conservatoire at the unusually young age of eleven, returning again in 1941 to teach. One of the highlights of his famous harmony classes – attended by many of the post-War avant-garde, including Pierre Boulez, Iannis Xenakis and Karlheinz Stockhausen – was an analysis of Debussy's symbolist opera *Pelléas et Mélisande*, which Messiaen claimed was the source of his own musical awakening when he first received the score as a Christmas present, aged ten.

Around that age Messiaen also developed the Catholic faith which became his chief source of spiritual consolation and inspiration. Many of his works illustrate a religious topic or scene, a lifelong attempt to adequately express the infinite, omnipresent and inconceivable nature of God. He departed from these themes in the *Tristan* trilogy – inspired by the myth of impossible love, which included the leviathan *Turangalila-Symphonie* – and in the many works resulting from his tireless transcriptions of birdsong.

In his music Messiaen favoured intense imagery, illuminated by highly charged melodies written in his own unique modal language, with rich scoring and a tendency towards orchestral excess – all together a kind of musical sensuality that was his inheritance and debt to Debussy.

But he is probably best known for a piece whose origin overshadows its content. *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (Quartet for the End of Time) was written during Messiaen's captivity in a prisoner-of-war camp during World War II. He used the central image of an angel announcing the end of time itself; the appeal of the eternal is not surprising, nor are the expansive horizons suggested by the modest instrumentation. We can only imagine the effect this must have had when, in the freezing winter and pouring rain, on instruments broken and old, he and a group of fellow musicians gave the premiere for the camp's gathered prisoners and guards. □

Olivier Messiaen *Éclairs sur l’Au-delà ...* (Illuminations of the Beyond ...) 1988–91

Programme note by Paul Griffiths

- 1 **Apparition du Christ glorieux**
(Apparition of Christ in Glory)
- 2 **La Constellation du Sagittaire**
(The Constellation of Sagittarius)
- 3 **L’Oiseau-lyre et la Ville-fiancée**
(The Lyrebird and the Bridal City)
- 4 **Les Élus marqués de sceau**
(The Elected Ones Marked With the Seal)
- 5 **Demeurer dans l’Amour ...**
(Abide in Love ...)
- 6 **Les Sept Anges aux sept trompettes**
(The Seven Angels with Seven Trumpets)
- 7 **Et Dieu essuiera toute larme de leurs yeux ...**
(And God Will Wipe Every Tear From Their Eyes ...)
- 8 **Les Étoiles et la Gloire**
(The Stars and Glory)
- 9 **Plusieurs oiseaux des arbres de Vie**
(Several Birds from the Trees of Life)
- 10 **Le Chemin de l’Invisible**
(The Path of the Invisible)
- 11 **Le Christ, lumière du Paradis**
(Christ, Light of Paradise)

hen, in August 1987, Messiaen wrote to accept the commission he had received from Zubin Mehta and the New York Philharmonic, he said he could not predict the length or scale of what he would produce. As it turned out, almost five years later, *Éclairs sur l’Au-delà ...* (Illuminations of the Beyond ...) lasted well over an hour, a whole concert in itself, scored for an orchestra of 128 including whole sub-orchestras of flutes and clarinets (ten of each), of percussion, and of brass (17 players). From a composer who had seemed to be ending his output with miniatures, here was immensity, devoted to what had always been his favourite subject: the afterlife.

The work opens with a pronouncement from all the wind, such as Messiaen had written before in *L’Ascension* and *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum*. Each movement is headed with at least one quotation, most of them taken, as in this case, from Revelation: ‘I saw the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle around his breast; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his face shone like the sun. In his right hand he held seven stars.’

After this strongly unified inauguration comes a pattern of small ensembles to represent, the stars prefiguring Heaven,

what was the composer’s own birth sign. There are four elements: first a robust melody on wind and bells, set to an ancient Indian rhythmic formula; then sweeter melody from the strings, with flute bird songs and percussion; followed by a nebula of sliding harmonics on first violins over an accelerating upward rush from seconds and violas; and finally six flutes playing different bird songs. Birds – flying, singing – are the nearest we have here on earth to angels, and Messiaen treasured them also for music that is purely divine and long pre-dates the arrival of our species. He repeats his fourfold sequence and begins a third cycle, but cuts it short for a coda.

One avian then takes over: the Superb Lyrebird, whose call is one of several Australian souvenirs from the composer’s 80th-birthday tour. Coming from so far away, its sound is that of another world. It brings, too, serene good humour to its role as the Celestial City dressing herself for espousal to Christ.

The compact fourth movement, contrastingly abstract, marks out numbers in durations tolled by bells, gongs and strings, while woodwinds and xylophone infiltrate bird songs into the arithmetic. The title refers to a passage in Revelation where an angel marks the foreheads of the chosen, but the

music seems to be remembering a specific feature of this episode, where four other angels hold back the four winds.

What follows to conclude the work’s first phase is a long adagio for strings without basses. We are back in the ‘Garden of Love’s Sleep’ from the [Turangalila-Symphonie](#), but with an extra chromatic urgency and rhythmic flexibility in the line.

Startling us out of this dream, the bass drum initiates a rhythmic machine that again has precedents in *Turangalila*. Three drumbeats start each cycle, and each ends with a crack of the whip, or slapstick, but in between comes a triple rhythm on low gongs and tam-tams that progressively slows down and speeds up again. The number seven is inscribed in the music several times over – seven elements in each cycle, durations of from one to seven semiquavers – for the seven angels. Meanwhile, their seven trumpets are present in a rugged theme from horns, trombones and bassoons, repeated in cycles of its own.

With another contrast, to tenderness, the short seventh movement begins with a high trill to prepare for woodwind chords that Messiaen in his sketches marked ‘like a caress’. A horn summons echoes through the

orchestra and is completed by a xylophone bird song. After a blackbird solo on flute, alone while the whole orchestra listens, there is a little more from the xylophone before the whole first part is repeated.

From this consolatory vision in the middle-high register, the eighth plummets to bring in the double basses for the first time. A stark four-note motif will gradually speed up and rise through the orchestra, amid more nebulae (from cellos this time) and starbursts of bird songs from around the world, including one of Messiaen's home favourites, the Garden Warbler (on flute). After the climax comes a pause and then a colossal chorale-coda, where the entire orchestra comes together to join with the angels singing to the shepherds: 'Glory to God in the highest!'

Once more the orchestra breathes back into itself, for the ninth movement is scored for just 18 woodwind players. Messiaen takes his epigraph here from a commentary on Revelation published in 1948 by Dom Jean de Monléon, who imagined the souls of the redeemed as birds in the branches of the Tree of Life, gathering its fruits and singing.

The penultimate movement swivels back from Paradise to review the difficulties of

the approach. Only one bird sings in this restless, punishing movement, whose main theme is a strenuous appeal. And it all ends as it began, with a wrenching chord and a slump to a low C.

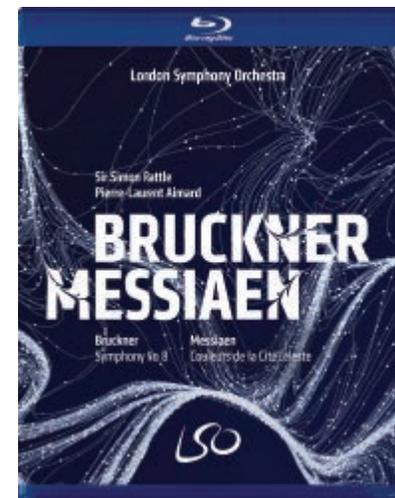
Nevertheless, Heaven is there, and it is here. The finale is the second extreme lento of muted violin melody couched on the harmony of other strings. This time, though, there is no striving for the peaks; the echo of the far treble – the light of Christ – is omnipresent in the metal shimmer of triangles. The melody unfolds, and pauses, but only because it is being played and heard by people still on earth. It is the image in our time of a single instant, a flash of eternity.

Messiaen completed the score in 1991. By the time of its first performance, given by Mehta and the New York Philharmonic on 5 November the following year, he was already among the Blessed. □

▷ TURANGALĪLA-SYMPHONIE

Messiaen's *Turangalila-Symphonie* is a large-scale work, written for the Boston Symphony Orchestra and given its world premiere under Leonard Bernstein in 1949. Messiaen finished the score the previous year and put into it a cross-section of his famously diverse interests: the medieval legend of Tristan and Isolde and the Sanskrit title meaning 'divine play' or, in the composer's own words, 'love song, hymn to joy, time, movement, rhythm, life and death'. He also incorporated an unusual new electronic keyboard instrument with an ethereal sound: the ondes-Martenot. The work is made up of ten movements, and features four recurring themes that reappear throughout.

▷ MESSIAEN ON LSO LIVE



Bruckner Symphony No 8
Messiaen Couleurs de la Cité Céleste

Sir Simon Rattle conductor
Pierre-Laurent Aimard piano

Available on Blu-ray and DVD at Isolive.co.uk

London Symphony Orchestra on stage 15 September

Leader

Carmine Lauri

First Violins

Clare Duckworth
Ginette Decuyper
Gerald Gregory
Laura Dixon
Maxine Kwok-Adams
William Melvin
Elizabeth Pigram
Laurent Quenelle
Harriet Rayfield
Colin Renwick
Sylvain Vasseur
Rhys Watkins
Julian Azkoul
Morane Cohen-
Lamberger
Grace Lee

Second Violins

David Alberman
Thomas Norris
Miya Väisänen
David Ballesteros
Matthew Gardner
Julian Gil Rodriguez
Alix Lagasse
Belinda McFarlane
Iwona Muszynska
Csilla Pogany
Paul Robson
Erzsebet Racz
Siobhan Doyle
Greta Mutlu

Violas

Edward Vanderspar
Malcolm Johnston
German Clavijo
Stephen Doman
Carol Ella
Robert Turner
Ilona Bondar
Michelle Bruil
Luca Casciato
May Dolan
Stephanie
Edmundson
Alistair Scahill

Cellos

Tim Hugh
Alastair Blayden
Jennifer Brown
Noel Bradshaw
Daniel Gardner
Hilary Jones
Laure Le Dantec
Amanda Truelove
Deborah Tolksdorf
Leo Melvin

Double Basses

Graham Mitchell
Colin Paris
Patrick Laurence
Matthew Gibson
Thomas Goodman
Joe Melvin
José Moreira
Simo Väisänen

Flutes

Gareth Davies
Charlotte Ashton
Jack Welch
Daniel Shao
Sarah Bennett
Clare Findlater

Alto Flute

Julian Sperry

Piccolos

Sharon Williams
Patricia Moynihan
Sarah Bennington

Oboes

Juliana Koch
Olivier Stankiewicz
Rosie Jenkins

Cor Anglais

Christine Pendrill

Clarinets

Chris Richards
John Bradbury
Elizabeth Drew
Alexei Dupressoir
Ben Aldren
Matthew Glendening

E-Flat Clarinets

Chi-Yu Mo
Thomas Watmough

Bass Clarinet

Renaud Guy-
Rousseau

Contrabass Clarinet

Steve Morris

Bassoons

Daniel Jemison
Todd Gibson-Cornish
Joost Bosdijk

Contra Bassoon

Dominic Morgan

Horns

Timothy Jones
Angela Barnes
Alexander Edmundson
Jonathan Maloney
Stephen Stirling
Jonathan Lipton
Paul Gardham

Trumpets

David Elton
Jason Evans
Robin Totterdell
Niall Keatley
Gerald Ruddock

Trombones

Peter Moore
James Maynard

Bass Trombone

Paul Milner

Tubas

Ben Thomson
Daniel Trodden

Percussion

Neil Percy
David Jackson
Sam Walton
Mark Robinson
Tom Edwards
Paul Stoneman
Owen Gunnell
Simon Carrington
Karen Hutt
Andrew Barclay
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Emmanuel Curt
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